

dairy raw materials (e.g. cream and/or protein) or other ingredients such as sugar or sweetening agents, one or more flavouring(s), cereals or nutritional substances, especially vitamins, minerals and fibers. Such yogurt advantageously meets the specifications for fermented milks and yogurts of the AFNOR NF 04-600 standard and/or the codex StanA-11a-1975 standard. In order to satisfy the AFNOR NF 04-600 standard, the product must not have been heated after fermentation and the dairy raw materials must represent a minimum of 70 wt % of the finished product. Yogurt encompasses set yogurt, stirred yogurt, drinking yogurt, Petit Suisse, heat treated yogurt and yogurt-like products. Preferably, the yogurt is a stirred yogurt or a drinking yogurt. More preferably, the yogurt is a stirred yogurt.

**[0010]** The term “starter culture composition” or “composition” (also referred to as “starter” or “starter culture”) as used herein refers to a composition comprising one or more lactic acid bacteria, which are responsible for the acidification of the milk base. Starter cultures compositions may be fresh (liquid), frozen or freeze-dried. Freeze dried cultures need to be regenerated before use. For the production of a fermented dairy product, the starter cultures composition is usually added in an amount from 0.01 to 3%, preferably from 0.01 and 0.02% by weight of the total amount of milk base.

**[0011]** As used herein, the term “lactic acid bacteria” (LAB) or “lactic bacteria” refers to food-grade bacteria producing lactic acid as the major metabolic end-product of carbohydrate fermentation. These bacteria are related by their common metabolic and physiological characteristics and are usually Gram positive, low-GC, acid tolerant, non-sporulating, non-respiring, rod-shaped bacilli or cocci. During the fermentation stage, the consumption of lactose by these bacteria causes the formation of lactic acid, reduces the pH and leads to the formation of a (milk) protein coagulum. These bacteria are thus responsible for the acidification of milk and for the texture of the fermented milk product.

**[0012]** As used herein, the term “lactic acid bacteria” or “lactic bacteria” encompasses, but is not limited to, bacteria belonging to the genus of *Lactobacillus* spp., *Bifidobacterium* spp., *Streptococcus* spp., *Lactococcus* spp., such as *Lactobacillus delbruekii* subsp. *bulgaricus*, *Streptococcus thermophilus*, *Lactobacillus lactis*, *Bifidobacterium animalis*, *Lactococcus lactis*, *Lactobacillus casei*, *Lactobacillus plantarum*, *Lactobacillus helveticus*, *Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *Bifidobacterium breve*.

**[0013]** The term “improvement” or “improved” as used in improvement of one or more of the attributes related to texture as defined herein below, means an improvement of one or more of the attributes related to texture obtained while using the composition of the invention as defined herein below in comparison with a composition comprising lactic acid bacteria other than at least strain B or at least strain D, or at least the combination of strain B and strain D. In the Examples such a composition has been used as the Reference. A control experiment without lactic acid bacteria is of course meaningless since in that case no fermented milk product such as yogurt can be obtained and no comparison can be made. An improvement in one or more of the attributes related to texture may be measured absolutely for instance in the case of Brookfield (Pa\*s units) or shear stress (Pa units) or more relatively by a taste panel for instance for all the sensory aspects of the fermented milk product.

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

**[0014]** In a first aspect the invention provides a process for the production of a fermented milk product, preferably yogurt, comprising fermenting milk using a composition comprising one or more bacterial strains selected from the group consisting of *Streptococcus thermophilus* DS71579 (Strain A), *Streptococcus thermophilus* DS71586 (Strain B), *Streptococcus thermophilus* DS71584 (Strain C), and *Streptococcus thermophilus* DS71585 (Strain D) and wherein the gel strength and/or the serum viscosity of the fermented milk product obtained, preferably yogurt, has been improved compared to the gel strength of a fermented milk product that has not been produced using the composition comprising one or more bacterial strains selected from the group consisting of *Streptococcus thermophilus* DS71579 (Strain A), *Streptococcus thermophilus* DS71586 (Strain B), *Streptococcus thermophilus* DS71584 (Strain C), *Streptococcus thermophilus* DS71585 (Strain D). One preferred embodiment of the process of the invention is using a composition comprising at least strain A. Another preferred embodiment of the process of the invention is using a composition comprising at least strain B. Another preferred embodiment of the process of the invention is using a composition comprising at least strain C. Another preferred embodiment of the process of the invention is using a composition comprising at least strain D.

**[0015]** The advantage of the process of the invention is that strain A as well as strain B as well as strain C as well as strain D is capable of improving the gel strength and/or the serum viscosity of a fermented milk product such as yogurt. Strain A as well as strain B as well as strain C as well as strain D used in the process of the invention is not only capable of improving the gel strength and/or the serum viscosity of the fermented milk products such as yogurt as such, but in particular strain A as well as strain B as well as strain C as well as strain D, as well as the below compositions 1 to 37, are capable of partially or fully restoring the gel strength and/or the serum viscosity of the fermented milk product such as yogurt wherein the protein content has been reduced, to the gel strength and/or the serum viscosity of the fermented milk product such as yogurt wherein the protein content not has been reduced. Therefore, instead of adding additional protein in the process of the invention for the production of a fermented milk protein such as yogurt with an improved gel strength and/or the serum viscosity, a composition comprising the lactic acid bacteria strain A or strain B or strain C or strain D as defined herein before may be used in the process of the invention in order to obtain an improved gel strength and/or serum viscosity.

**[0016]** Another advantage of the present invention is that the present strains provide an improved acidification rate, i.e. the time to reach pH 4.6. A reduced time to reach pH 4.6 is advantageous for large scale production of yogurt wherein it is beneficial to reduce manufacturing time of the yogurt. In a preferred embodiment, the present composition comprising one or more bacterial strains provides a time to reach pH 4.6 of less than 400 minutes, preferably less than 380 minutes, more preferably less than 360 minutes for yogurts having a protein content of smaller than 4.0%. In another preferred embodiment, the present composition comprising one or more bacterial strains provides a time to reach pH 4.6 of less than 500 minutes, preferably less than 450 minutes,